

New Religious Formations of the West and India : A Comparative Analysis from the Perspective of the Hare Krishna Movement

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Abstract

This paper aims to explain the evolution of New Religious Formations (NRFs) in the West and India with special reference to the Hare Krishna Movement. The comparison can be traced back to the role played by religion at an individual and community level and by examining the term 'New' in NRFs. While elaborating on the 'secularization' debate that assesses the 'newness' of the NRFs, the author traces genealogy of the NRFs in the West since the days of the "ancien régime" matrix. The matrix was characterized by not only divine will and efforts to suppress 'popular religions but also reactions of popular religions to be reconstituted in the face of such suppression. Therefore, NRFs, in the West reflected a bottom-up approach in their evolution. In India, on the other hand, it was colonialism that provided impetus to the NRFs. Impact of colonialism encapsulated instances of emergence of religious nationalism as well as Gandhiji's idea of spiritualizing politics as the basis of nation building. In fact, the trend of spreading religious teachings incorporated in Indic religious worldview that began with Swami Vivekananda was carried forward by Srila Prabhupad through his Hare Krishna movement. In the initial days of its inception in the United States of America, not only its popularity increased among the Indians, but it also provided emotional support to the youth of United States of America at the peak of Cold War when capitalism characterized by motives of profit and conformist attitude was reigning supreme in the West. In the contemporary socio-economic milieu of globalization, the Hare Krishna movement is also trying to bind the international diaspora of communities across the globe in helping them with forging their individual as well as collective identity amidst professional competitions through its basic tenets like popularizing vegetarian food, prohibition of any form of addiction, and cultivation of the Kirtan culture. Thus, in the contemporary context also the Hare Krishna movement is adapting itself to the requirements of globalization. This effectively means that NRFs in India exhibit a top-down approach.

Keywords: *Role of religion, secularization, colonialism, globalization.*

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To understand the concept of New Religious Formations, one needs to comprehend the relevance of religion in an individual's life. Erikson in his 'Insight and Responsibility' recognized religion's potential in identity development. 'On one hand, religion provides an opportunity to gain transcendental worldview, on the other hand, this transcendental worldview helps one to look beyond oneself and feel unified with fellow beings.'¹ That is why it can be said that religion creates 'an acute awareness of connectedness with others that promotes integration of moral and civic identity.'² Whether the term 'new' in the title of the research signifies a complete transformation in the societal role of religion or gives rise to modified religious dimensions in one's life, can only be understood in the context of the secularization debate.

The religion versus modernity debate has been summed up by Taylor in two broad theses – 'the disappearance thesis and the epiphenomenal thesis.'³ The first says that the independent motivation to religious belief and action tends to disappear in conditions of modernity. The second says that in conditions of modernity (if not always), religious belief and action can only be epiphenomenal, that is, functional to some distinct goals or purposes. The second thesis seems to support the arguments made above that advocate that religion, being subordinated to other factors in society perform functions other than relating individuals to the Supreme being. This thesis can be related to Marx's idea of religion being the 'heart of the heartless world'⁴ because the religious motive was tied to consoling the misery, suffering, and despair of the human conditions. Keeping these two theses in mind, Charles Taylor, attempted to trace a change in forms of religiosity in the West, which not only deals with a collapse of faith in traditional Christianity, but also founding of new denominations like Methodism. It includes a new placement of the spiritual in relation to individual and social life.

New Religious Formations of the West

Taylor's discussion of evolution of religiosity can be traced back to the first ideal type, the "*ancien régime*"⁵ matrix which was a pre-modern order of hierarchical complementarity and was grounded in the Divine Will or the law of nature. This notion of order held both for the larger society in which one was subordinated to King, Lord, Bishops, nobility, and for the

microcosm of the village or the parish, where priests and nobles held sway, and each person had their place. But despite all attempts of the official religion, ‘magical and pagan’⁶ elements continued to remain substantial elements of ‘folk religion’⁷ in England, for instance.

These local community forms were soon disrupted. In a sense, the disruption started with Reformation itself, but the force of ‘popular religion’⁸ allowed them to be reconstituted, often on an altered basis. It is a feature of the whole modern period, that social élites become detached from, even hostile to much of popular culture, and attempt to make it over. One of the things they have frequently imposed is disenchantment, the suppression of ‘magic’ and unofficial religion.

Now this process of élite-engendered destruction and popular recreation happened repeatedly in the centuries which followed. In France, the Revolution and the ‘dechristianization’⁹ following the revolution in the early 1790s, the imprisoning and exile of priests and bishops, brought about a severe disruption of religious practice. This last event, ushered into a new era. For the first time, the destroyers offered a new anti-Christian ideology to fill the gap. They were in the short term remarkably unsuccessful. But a long-term battle ensued between Catholic and “Republican” élites to make over France in their image. The Restoration Catholic Church tried to win back the lost terrain, and it was supported by many leading groups, out of piety and or concern for social order. On the other hand, the Protestant Church born out of dechristianization tried to retain its supremacy over the Catholic Church. Napoleon’s ‘Concordat of 1801’¹⁰ ended religious violence for the duration of the Empire by laying out specific terms of coexistence guaranteed to protect both Catholic and Protestant religious communities. At first the alliance of throne and altar was re-affirmed, but the goal of preserving the crucial place of the Church led to the abandoning of the other. Society was seen as organic, and one’s place in this organic whole was the essential definer of obligation and duty. The Church was that of the whole society, to which everyone must belong, and it was considered the guardian and articulator of the sacred to which one had social obligations. Societies organized by such a church are in this meaning “Durkheimian”, in the sense that church and social sacred are one—although for Durkheim, ‘the social is the principal focus, reflected in the divine.’¹¹ This kind of attempt to re-establish Christendom everywhere

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generated counterefforts which took the form of secularist liberal or radical movements, and often found their inspiration in the French Revolution. The result was a deep rift, and important levels of dissidence in the middle classes, especially the working class. One reason for this was church generally stood with the ‘monarchical-hierarchical status quo’¹² and thus drove those who suffered from this to oppose it.

The cultural gap between élite and mass, which is characteristic of the modern age, makes it difficult to sustain a church which is really for everyone in society. This ‘cultural-devotional estrangement’¹³ was further exacerbated by class conflict. Once the sense arises that one is not part of an organic community, but suffers from exploitation, the issue arises regarding whose side the established church is on. In most of Europe, the hierarchy came down on the side of the established order, or landlords and employers.

Industrial Revolution towards the end of eighteenth century created employment opportunities in cities. The masses began to move from the villages to the cities. The erosion and breaking open of this community, the displacement of its members into cities, undermined and sidelined its practices as effectively as elite-imposed Reform, and sometimes even more so. That is, the new city-dweller, no longer relating back to a living community, would find himself with a void in his spiritual life, and had to find a way of weaving new forms and community allegiances in the new situation. In late-nineteenth-century Europe, the gamut of choices had been crucially widened. ‘Modalities of exclusive humanism’¹⁴ were now plausible options.

So, popular alienation from élite-dominated religion and large-scale migration can take the form of new voluntary associations rather different from the earlier churches. The prototype of these is the ‘Wesleyan Methodist’¹⁵ who were neither a church nor a sect, but a proto form of what is now called a “denomination”. At its beginning, the Methodist movement did not aspire church hood, and was included within the national Church of England. They would practice their own kind of spirituality, but within a broader body which included others. Denominations are like affinity groups. They do not see their differences from others as make-or-break, salvation-or-damnation issues. Their way is better for them, but this belief does not cut them off from other recognized denominations.

These denominations proved extremely crucial when new migrants of the time often struggled to find their feet in a more market-driven economy and where survival often depended on adaptation to new conditions; migration; and adopting new work disciplines outside of traditional social forms. These forms of spirituality were on both the Protestant and the Catholic side combined with attempts to inculcate the new ethos and disciplines necessary to function in the changed economy and society. On both sides, the attempts to set up the necessary organs of economic survival, such as friendly societies, credit unions, were often linked with churches. So, these new forms of spirituality inculcated a sense of discipline which manifested not only in one's personal but also professional life.

Several theories appear to regard NRFs as a distinctively modern phenomenon which reflects fundamental social and cultural change. Wilson argues that these should be seen as a 'response to the process of secularization'¹⁶ within society and even within traditional religions. Robbins has attributed the primary source of New Religious Formations to 'dislocation of communal pattern.'¹⁷ He tends to identify some forms of distinctively modern dislocation, some mode of alienation, anomie or deprivation to which people are responding by searching new structures of meaning and community. For example, The situation during the Industrial Revolution facilitated introduction of individuality in religion. Hence, it can be said that NRFs in Europe, during the initial years had a bottom-up approach as they developed as a response to the elite opposition to 'popular religion' and helped the working class to reinforce their identities in a changing socio-economic context.

New Religious Formations in India

As industrial revolution led to the reconstitution of religiosity of the working class in Europe, it also provided impetus to the desire for colonization for expansion of markets. A crucial aspect of colonization was establishment of civilizational superiority of Europe over its colonies. The superiority may have ultimately been understood as that of 'Christendom' over other religions, but within Christendom, Britain and America stood at the forefront. This sense of superiority, originally religious in essence, underwent a process of 'secularization', as the sense of civilizational superiority became detached from Providence, and got attributed to race,

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or Enlightenment, or even sometimes a combination of both.

The project of colonial modernity, since then, had aroused great socio-political tensions and intellectual responses with claims and counterclaims on norms, beliefs, practices, and processes. The debate revolved around the chief claim of modernity, as ‘an emancipatory quest which is qualitatively different from the taboos of traditionalism’¹⁸ and as a liberal ethos of individuation. In the process, it hinted at the critique of colonial modernity with the argument of India’s ‘glorious past’. The basic tenets of this argument included cultural nationalism, interplay of tradition and modernity reflected in different levels of ‘assimilation and syncretism’¹⁹ and post-colonial arguments about paradoxes of the western modernity project in India. It is interesting to note that each strand of argument emphasized on using Hindu nationalist framework of evoking Vedic rhetoric and idioms for shaping various types of anti-colonial propaganda. For instance, cultural nationalism began as a means of ‘emulating and stigmatizing the threatening others’²⁰ through which Hinduism was to assume a unified structure in the face of Christianity and Islam. Forms of European militant nationalism was reinterpreted in the guise of evoking Vedic Hinduism. Swami Vivekananda, who was the pioneer of popularizing Hinduism globally in the Parliament of Religions at Chicago was also in favour of combining materialism of the West with spirituality of East. So, religion was important in India in the context of modernity that was associated initially with colonialism in India.

Swami Vivekananda believed that each nation carries a corresponding idea and if this idea decays, the nation would start showing signs of decaying. For India, this idea is religion which ought to be preserved in the face of modernity and secularization. Sri Aurobindo also emphasized on the idea of religiosity in his ideals of the nationalist movement. Even though Nehru and Ambedkar tried to focus less on religion in the newly independent India as they believed that any reference to tradition and spirituality will mean producing ‘hegemony of the Hindu upper class’²¹, yet after independence, the post-colonial thinkers in India have shown an interest towards reviving Indian traditions as a means of modernizing the country. For instance, Ranajit Guha speaks of subaltern movement that seeks to ‘recover local traditions, indigenous knowledge, subdued and forgotten memories.’²² By challenging the ‘secret’ realm of culture they

provide an alternative history and mode of reason through religion. Ranajit Guha draws the example of the Santhal Rebellion led by Birsa Munda who mobilized the Santhals, against the British, in the name of 'God.' It can be implied that religion, in its multiple modified forms continues to be a vital social force in post-independence India.

Among the multiple modified versions of religion, social reform movements of late eighteenth and nineteenth century pioneered by Raja Rammohun Roy and later by Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo are very significant. Being influenced by the western liberal tradition, Raja Rammohun Roy focused on social service and doing away with social evils rather than on rituals and temple worship. Swami Vivekananda, on the other hand, upheld the universal principles of Hinduism and the Neo-Vedantic ideas of spiritual liberation, cosmic harmony, universalism, or rational practice in the Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893. Sri Aurobindo carried forward the idea of Neo-Vedanta and emphasized on the idea of selfless action or '*Karma Yoga*.'²³ The goal of Neo-Vedantic Hinduism was to pave the way for emergence of Indian nationalism and to harmonize the world and the spirit. Hence the social reform movements aimed a synthesis of Western liberal tradition and Eastern spirituality. That is why the social reform movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth century can be considered both 'revivalist and internationalist.'²⁴ This co-existence of tradition in the form of religion along with the modern values of nationalism has been a characteristic feature of India's pre-independence new religious formations that reflected India's unique 'cultural metabolism'²⁵ allowing the Indians to keep the spheres of religion and science separate and at the same time combine the required elements of the two.

The ideal of Neo-Vedanta seemed to resurface with the new religious formations in post-independence India in the context of growing intensity of Cold War across the world. Since 1960s, the spread of Neo-Hinduism through organizations like ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness), OSHO, and the Brahmakumaris emerged with unique traits of inclusiveness, alternative spirituality, transnational scope, charismatic religious leaders or gurus and the belief that one's ethnic identity has nothing to do with one's spiritual practice.

The West, especially the United States of America, being the major

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advocate of capitalism during the Cold War, supported the triumph of market economy which paved the way for flourishing of consumer culture. This meant that people were now driven by motives of personal profit in the West. People concentrated more on their own lives, and that of their nuclear families. They moved to new towns or suburbs; lived more on their own; tried to make a life out of the ever-growing gamut of new goods and services on offer, from washing-machines to packaged holidays, and the freer individual lifestyles they facilitated. In this newly individuated space, the customer was encouraged more and more to express her taste, furnishing her space according to her own desire. An individual was offered a range of choices in terms of lifestyle from which one could choose.

One important facet of this new consumer culture was the creation of a special youth market, with a range of new goods, from clothes to records, that aimed at an age bracket which included adolescents and young adults. The advertising used to sell these goods in symbiosis with the youth culture helped create a new kind of consciousness of youth as a stage in life, between childhood and adulthood tied down by responsibility. Indeed, with the expansion of urban life, 'upper and middle-class youth began to become conscious of itself as a social reality'²⁶ towards the end of the nineteenth century.

The society of the 1950s was considered as conformist, crushing individuality and creativity, and too concerned with production and concrete results, repressing feeling, and spontaneity, exalting the mechanical over the organic. Paul Tillich, while delivering his lecture in 1957, pointed out, 'We hope for more non-conformists among you, for your sake, for the sake of the nation, and for the sake of humanity.'²⁷ In Taylor's words, 'The revolts of young people in the '60s' were indeed, directed against a 'system which smothered creativity, individuality, and imagination.'²⁸ On one hand, there was rise of this consciousness and on the other, there was slimming down of the welfare state, increasing income inequality and nuclear lifestyle and erosion of community. It was in this context that the Hare Krishna Movement, which later became popular as ISCKON, founded by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada in 1965 for the global dissemination of its version of Hinduism based on the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavada Purana, rose to prominence in

the West to provide emotional support to the ‘lonely crowd’²⁹ who had access to all the materialistic luxuries of life and yet suffered from a sense of rootlessness. It absolutely prohibited ‘consumption of non-vegetarian food, illicit sexual affairs, any form of substance abuse and gambling,’³⁰ as the main aim of the Hare Krishna movement was to unite its members with Lord Krishna by helping them to rise above the material pleasures of life. In fact, ISCKON even had a system of getting its members married to each other binding them into a community. Gradually Prabhupad aimed at extending this community to India.

Prabhupad came back to India in 1967 when the ‘Naxalite movement’³¹ was at its peak in Bengal. The uncertainty in the social milieu laid the ideal foundation for the flourishing of ISCKON among the wealthy business community of Bengal. Moreover, Prabhupad was convinced that the Indian youth would be influenced by ISCKON if he could uphold the example of the American youth doing the same. ISCKON’S coming to India was an example of the ‘pizza effect’³² which implied the westernization of Indian religiosity and its return to India as ‘new.’

The end of Cold War that paved the way for the triumph of capitalism all over the world also changed the socio-economic culture of the society. Liberalization of world economy facilitated free flow of goods, services and human resources across geographical boundaries leading to an expansion of Indian diasporas in Western countries and number of Indians working in Multinational Corporations. In Rochford’s opinion, the era of liberalization of world economy led to changes in the modus operandi of ISCKON. In Putnam’s opinion, since this is an age of ‘bowling alone,’³³ religion is about the self’s fullness, self’s innermost subjectivity, and self’s depths of being. It must start with the person’s reaching out to his innermost self, accepting his limitations, healing his brokenness, integrating the different aspects of his personality, his various experiences, his total history, and memory of it. The resources for this task can continue to be the traditional resources of religion. For alternative spiritualities, no stone is left unturned in seeking and utilizing whatever resources are available, which includes rituals and practices of Eastern religions. That is why ISCKON temple of Mayapur has an extremely active culture of “*Kirtan*”³⁴ that brings people of varied culture together for their love of

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music. Moreover, the food available at different restaurants of ISCKON across India offers different types of cuisine in vegetarian options that is not only attracting customers from different cultures but also upholding the basic Vaishnava tenet of vegetarianism. That is why New Religious Formations in contemporary times are known to be binding together the international diaspora of communities moving beyond geographical boundaries of countries. A community gives the sense of belonging to individuals who are otherwise isolated and lonely in today's competitive world.

From the above discussion, it can be understood that New Religious Formations of the West had a bottom-up approach as they mostly originated in the face of revolts against 'institutional' religions of the elites. Initially, New Religious Formations in India had exhibited a similar tendency as they began to manifest as a reaction against colonialism. But once India became independent of colonial rule, New Religious Formations like ISCKON, in the context of Cold War, began to exhibit a top-down approach because after having humble beginnings in India, it became popular in the United States of America and then returned to expand its membership base in India. This tendency was further enhanced by the triumph of capitalism at the end of Cold War in the late 1980s that facilitated the liberalization of economies and free movement of goods, services, ideas, and human resources across the geographical borders of the world. ISKCON also utilized the basic tenets of market economy to spread its branches across the world and create a community of followers who adapt its preaching to their geographical location and context.

Endnotes:

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³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2007), p.438.

⁴ Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, ed. Joseph O'Malley (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p.200.

⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p.438.

⁶ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Scribner: New York, 1971), p.279.

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- ⁷ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p.280.
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- ¹⁸ Avijit Pathak, *Modernity, Globalization and Identity: Towards a Reflexive Quest* (New Delhi: Aakar Books, 2006), p.16.
- ¹⁹ Yogendra Singh, *Cultural Change in India: Identity and Globalization* (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2000), p.35.
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- ²¹ Pathak, *Modernity, Globalization and Identity*, p.21.
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- ²⁴ Gerald Larson, *India's agony over religion* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), p.67.

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- ²⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p.475.
- ²⁷ Alan Ehrenhalt, *The Lost City: The Forgotten Virtues of Community in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), p. 61.
- ²⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p.476.
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- ³⁴ Swami Maharaj, *Prabhupad*, p.85.